

THE LONDON GUARDIAN
28 January 1980

Soviet breach feared at British code centre

by David Leigh

Some of the group of so far un-named Soviet sympathisers in British intelligence may have penetrated the SIGINT code-breaking network at Cheltenham, and its war-time predecessor at Bletchley.

British and Canadian security men suspected this, and MI5 interviews were still taking place at the end of last year among people who worked in code-breaking shortly after the last war.

It has now been disclosed that the head of Canada's anti-Soviet department of the security police, who was interrogated in 1972 and subsequently took a medical discharge, was an Englishman who spent the eight years after the war working for SIGINT, an organisation whose existence was unknown to the British public until the late 1970s.

Although the man concerned, Leslie Bennett, was exonerated after a four-day interrogation, and it is not suggested that he was a Soviet spy, this is the first evidence of security fears about Bletchley and Cheltenham, and the first time details have emerged of the career of SIGINT operatives. Two journalists were tried on spying charges in the Aubrey, Berry, Campbell case in 1978 after interviewing a former soldier about his work for SIGINT in the 1960s.

Mr Bennett, the subject, he claims, of a thinly fictionalised novel describing him as a Soviet agent "turned" by the CIA, has also been the victim of speculation in North America that he was connected with Burgess, Maclean and Philby. He was a colleague of Kim Philby in Turkey in 1947-48, when the "third man" was rising fast in the MI6 hierarchy,

and is taking a libel action against the Canadian author of the novel, *S-Portrait of a Spy*. The transcripts of private preliminary hearings in Toronto are now available, and his career emerges from them.

From a family of Welsh Labour supporters, with a Communist uncle, Mr Bennett was in war-time Signals Intelligence, the Ultra codebreakers. In 1946, when the Enigma code-breakers at Bletchley Park were being reorganised at Cheltenham, he stayed with the Government Communications HQ.

His first assignment, as the secret UKUSA pact was signed with the US National Security Agency to conduct worldwide radio anti-Soviet eavesdropping, was in Turkey in 1947. Kim Philby was posted there as head of the Istanbul MI6 station, the main base for southern espionage against the USSR. Ostensibly recruiting agents and infiltrators Philby occasionally met Bennett who was much his junior.

Later he was posted to a listening station in Hong Kong for two years, to the Cyprus base for a visit, and to Australia. Mr Bennett maintained that the British Official Secrets Act forced him to keep secret the details of his cipher work, which he will only describe as "special intelligence."

In 1954 he went to Canada to join the tiny anti-Soviet section of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police security service, which was rapidly expanding as Soviet penetration increased. The security service grew from 75 to 600 men by 1972, very much under the tutelage of the British.

Mr Bennett threw several sidelights on British MI5 operations

during his testimony, explaining that in 1972 he liaised once a month with the British-FBI linkman in Washington, who he named as, at that time, Mr Michael McCall. In western security circles, he said, Britain was regarded as second only to the US as a KGB target.

There had been spy scandals already in Canada. A post-war defector in Ottawa, Ivor Gouzenko, led to the gaoling of the British atomic scientist Nunn May, and eventually to highly-secret studies — known as Operation Featherbed — of homosexuals and "security risks" in Canadian government work in which Mr Bennett was involved.

In April 1972, by now promoted from the anti-Soviet desk, and aged 52, Mr Bennett was taken to an Ottawa "safe house," told he was suspected of being a Soviet agent, and interrogated for four days about his early family history and eight Canadian counter-espionage "misfires" under his charge.

He protested his innocence, which was eventually established. The then Solicitor-General, Mr Francis Fox, said later in Parliament that there was no evidence against him. But he immediately decided to leave the security service with a medical discharge.

Despite Mr Bennett's innocence, there are still British fears that Cheltenham and Bletchley were "penetrated." Last November, as the Blunt affair broke, three former post-war code-breakers were interviewed anew by MI5 men, according to GCHQ sources. Asked about their associates at the time, they were told that "sixth and seventh men" in the Philby group were still being pursued.